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SOME SUGGESTIONS AS TO BIBLE INTERPRETATION.

By E. R. POPE, B. D.,

Morgan Park, Ill.

The Bible occupies a place in the literature of the world distinct from that held by any other volume. It contains the bulk of the literary productions of one race—the Hebrew; it lies at the foundation, permeates all the materials, forms the very cap-stone itself of the splendid literary structure reared by another race—the Anglo-Saxon; while other peoples the globe over acknowledge its surpassing merit.

The Bible holds a like position in religion. Among religious writings, this book stands preeminent; its morals are purer, its teachings nobler, its influence more notable than all other so-called sacred books. Where its precepts are honored, there progress in all that concerns man's betterment is found. Its followers are earnest and aggressive; and as the Book is known, men acknowledge its truth and become its devoted adherents.

The Bible claims supreme authority over men. It enters into the State, comes into the social circle, opens the door of the family, and penetrates the soul of each individual; everywhere declaring the true principles whereby all the relations of this life should be governed. This authority is demanded as a right, for the Book claims divine origin. It is a revelation, disclosing the One God, man's distance from him, and the bridge that spans the distance.

In view of the Bible's position and claims, the question of its interpretation is a most serious one. There is danger on each side. In our anxiety to find the true spirit that lies within, our dissecting knife may slip and sever the vital chord; the soul vanishing, the lifeless body only will remain. Or, on the other hand, in our excessive care not to impair the vitality of the Book, we may so bandage and incase it that no eye can penetrate the folds or recognize what is really within. We appreciate the difficulties that attend the subject, yet we would make some suggestions which, if carried out, we believe will lead to the truer understanding of God's Word.

I. SOME ERRORS TO BE SHUNNED.

1. The Bible should not be interpreted as a *mere record instructing men in history*. This is the rationalistic position. The Bible is merely a human production, the wonderful and miraculous must be eliminated, the divine element ignored, what remains interpreted by the ordinary laws of language. The naturalness of the Psalter, the rhetoric of Isaiah, the logic of Paul call forth the admiration of the followers of this school; the literary merits of the various books are recognized, but there is nothing beyond this. The book is interesting and instructive to such men solely as exhibiting the high development of the Jewish people in literature. The feeling with which these men regard the Book is similar to that of the scholar, who studies the classics of Greece and Rome, or of the antiquarian, who explores the monuments of Egypt and Akkad.

We leave, without argument, this method of interpretation, that is more defective in its omissions than in its contents; for the Bible does contain history,

but its real meaning cannot be ascertained when it is viewed from so low a plane.

2. The Bible should not be interpreted as *a compendium instructing men in science*. Often in years gone by, good men through mistaken ideas of God's Word have opposed real advance in knowledge. The Bible never has stood, and never will stand in the way of truth, man's interpretation may do so again, even as it has done in the past. Is evolution in its extreme positions true? We do not know. If, however, the scientist proves it, does that compel us to discard the Bible? It may necessitate change in interpretation, that is all; but let us hesitate to change, until we are assured of the necessity.

God has spoken to man in nature and in His Book. These do not, cannot contradict each other in the last analysis. They occupy distinct spheres, and are given to teach mankind different subjects. "The Hebrew people [were] of old divinely chosen to hold and teach the principles of true religion." Nature has other important truths for man, but they are not in the religious realm. Man by searching is to discover the principles concealed in nature and in the Book; but he must search in each for such as it contains, else his labor will be worse than useless. The Bible does not teach geology, chemistry, nor any of the sciences, and hence we should not expect to find in it instruction in those departments, nor should we interpret it as containing them.

3. The Bible should not be interpreted as *a text-book instructing men in theology*. Theology is a glorious science, the queen of all sciences, as it has been styled. It deserves the most careful study man can render; it calls forth all his power and demands all his energy. We revere the mighty list of holy men who have toiled in its service. Theological systems, however, are the work of men. Man takes the truths found in the Bible and arranges them in systematic form. We must not hold the *system* of divine origin, even though all its truths are. Sometimes, the thinker obtains an idea that apparently fills a gap in the system—and then the Bible is searched for confirmatory evidence. Passages from Exodus, Daniel, Mark are seized with eager hand, made to yield the same meaning—and thus, the doctrine is established! This is not the way to interpret God's truth. There is a growth in doctrine visible throughout the Word of God. Moses did not have so full an idea of God's purpose as did James. As Bernard well says in *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*, "In the Old Testament the progress is protracted, interrupted, often languid, sometimes so dubious as to seem like retrogression. . . . Yet through it all the doctrine grows, and the revelation draws nearer the great disclosure. Then there is entire suspension. We turn the vacant page which represents the silence of 400 years,—and we are in the New Testament. Now again there is progress, but rapid and unbroken. Our steps before were centuries, now they are but years."

We welcome biblical theology, which considers the truths of the Word of God in the light of their historical development; we urge their systemization. But we deplore that exegesis which ignores the real meaning of the text, and looks upon the Book as given to prove pre-conceived doctrines rather than as the source from which every doctrine must flow.

4. The Bible should not be interpreted as *an oracle instructing men in conduct*. The Bible is given to guide men in conduct. The method, however, by which its help is to be obtained, is not like that of the Greeks, when they consulted the Delphic oracle. The Bible contains the words of good men and bad men; the words of God, and the words of Satan, much is recorded by way of warning. The

interpretation of the Book as an oracle ignores these facts. All is alike authoritative and must be implicitly followed. Am I in doubt? Open the Bible, and let the passage upon which my eye first lights, guide me. This is an easy method—but no good thing can be thus easily obtained. This is not using truth; it is perverting it. Every principle of common sense, every law of language, every thought of the words may be violated by such interpretation. This is bibliolatry in its worst form, it professes to honor, it really dishonors God. Man's fancy rules, imagination runs wild; theory flourishes while fact disappears. The principles beneath the words are what should guide men in their conduct; the words are but vehicles for conveying thought. We wish to know the mind of the Spirit. Not worshipping the words but applying ourselves to them that we may truly appreciate and understand the lessons they bring to us.

Have these negations taken the life from the Book? Not so. The Bible is more real, more living than before. We indicate now some of the considerations that must guide in the interpretation of God's Word.

II. SOME PRINCIPLES TO BE FOLLOWED.

1. In our interpretation of the Scriptures we should recognize its *human authorship*. The rationalist is right when he says the Bible is a product of man's genius; he is wrong when he stops there. The Christian is right when he says that the Bible has God for its author; he is wrong when he stops with that statement. The personal traits of the writers are seen ever and anon throughout the Book. Jeremiah and Ezekiel live on different thought-levels; Matthew and Luke do not regard our Lord from the same standpoint; Daniel and John each have glimpses of the world beyond, but how diverse their visions. To ignore the human element in the Bible is to lose much of its force, beauty and grandeur; to recognize it is to apprehend more fully the mind of its writers, and to find new wealth of meaning in its teachings. The Bible is God's book, unfold that conception—then your grasp on that thought; the Bible is man's book, unfold that conception—then your grasp on the volume will be tightened, your appreciation of its meaning heightened.

2. While the human authorship is thus acknowledged, the *literary structure* of the Bible must also be recognized in our interpretation.

The poetic language of Jacob's blessing, the hymn of Deborah's triumph, the songs of David are not to be bound by those laws that regulate the interpretation of more sober prose. The extravagant fancy of the Eastern mind, to which truth is not truth unless magnified, must be recognized and flights of the imagination must not be taken for historic verities. The compact logic of Paul differs widely from the fervid rhapsody of John; to hold each by the same iron chain is to lose in large measure the force and spirit of both. Words change in meaning with revolving years, the same word as used by Micah may have an entirely different concept from that given to it by Nathan. The subject presented, the object in view, the whole drift of the poem, narrative or argument, all must be considered. God's Book is a composite volume, a great object-lesson put of record that we, as children, may learn our Father's will. We seek the root not the flower, which may be bright but will perish with the first frost.

3. From literary structure, we advance to the next principle, viz.: that the *historical setting* of each book must be recognized in its interpretation.

The political relations of Judah, Assyria and Egypt in the days of Isaiah, the disturbing elements in the early churches, to which Paul wrote his letters,

throw light on many a chapter of prophet and apostle, that otherwise would appear as a dark enigma. Without their historical setting, the prophetic books oft times appear as vapid dreamings; while considered as sermons preached with immediate purpose, and in knowledge of the needs of the people—they become words eloquent with power of rebuke or comfort. The Bible may be compared to a picture; without the background the picture is crude and unreal, that is needed to give relief and force to the whole; so, too, the historical setting is the background that imparts vividness and reality to the Word of God. Now the past is present and all gains in freshness and interest.

4. Last, but most important of all, the peculiar feature of the Book, its *spiritual aim* must be recognized.

Herein the Bible differs from other books. "Instruction in righteousness" is its aim. All that pertains to the spiritual welfare of man is its object. It reveals God as one regarding justice and loving mercy, it pictures man as guilty and condemned, it displays God's great purpose of redemption in Christ Jesus. This purpose seen in dimmest outline in Eden as the triumph of the good over the evil, reflected in shadowy form through patriarch, priest and prophet ever develops—its shadows ever lessening, its outline ever filling until it bursts in the grand full splendor of the Cross and the Resurrection.

We, looking backward, see God's purpose thus accomplished, and in this light much of the mystery is dissolved. What to Hebrew sage and people appeared as a flickering rushlight, to us blazes as the full-orbed sun at noonday. Here then is seen the aim of the Book in the Divine Man, the Lord Christ. This aim must guide our interpretation, forgetting it we are wanderers on the desert and all around is strange and dreary. The Bible is one, yet many; giving each book its value as an unit, they combine in one grand integer. "It is," to use the words of Dr. Briggs, "the unity of the ocean, where every wave has its individuality of life and movement. It is the unity of the continent in which mountains and rivers, valleys and uplands, flowers and trees, birds and insects, animal and human life combine to distinguish it as a magnificent whole from other continents. It is the unity of the heaven, where star differs from star in form, color, order, movement, size and importance, but all declare the glory of God."

By following these principles and avoiding these errors, God's Book will more readily yield its secrets, many of its mysteries will disappear—and its teachings will come to men with greater force. While He, who is its author, will be honored the more, as His Word is interpreted aright.